

to initiate non-traditional women's roles in Indian modernism. Natarajan explains how the roles of the prenuptial maternal homeplace and the post-nuptial homeplace as sanctuaries of potential women's empowerment are undermined and reconfigured as dystopias by cable and satellite television programs, as the programs raise questions of unpaid labor, sexual exploitation of women, and daughters' potential as heirs to property. Likewise, the supremacy of the Brahmana father figure in the paternal homeplace as idealized in Indian cultural narratives become destabilized through British colonialism, Indian nationalism, and the influence of Syrian Catholic Christianity.

Natarajan concedes that the demise of the traditional homeplace induces alternative possibilities in the city for reimagining a new national consciousness. These possibilities are projected through Rohinton Mistry's *A Fine Balance*. Like *God of Small Things*, *A Fine Balance* provides the potential of escape from traditionalism through artificial bonding in lodgings and workplaces. Women and men form non-traditional alliances that challenge and partially erode the caste system and class elitism in cities. Natarajan sees in the city novel such as *A Fine Balance* the potential for a re-conceptualization and re-perception of modern Indian woman as an insurrectionist Bharat Mata who leads the way toward the definition of a new modern Indian national consciousness.

Natarajan has done a fine job, though she could have expanded the scope of the book. The last chapter also reads as if it was rushed, and does not have the same exegetical vigor as the other chapters. Nonetheless, it is a text I would recommend to scholars interested in the place of woman in post-colonial societies, particularly the way they are re-envisioned and re-constructed in the cityscapes of new postcolonial states.

Dannabang Kuwabong

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Christopher J. Knight. *Uncommon Readers: Denis Donoghue, Frank Kermode, George Steiner, and the Tradition of the Common Reader*. Toronto: U of Toronto P, 2003. Pp. xiii, 506. \$50.00 cloth.

This compendious and well written book is a valuable addition to UTP's new series, Studies in Book and Print Culture. Its very thoroughness may make it unattractive to anyone but the academic reader, but it deserves careful consideration by such readers at a time of volatility and vulnerability in the humani-

ties in general and literary studies in particular. Like histories of academic institutions and disciplines, studies of the oeuvres of eminent scholars help us to situate the challenges of the present, if not to solve them. Having read this book, I have a much clearer sense of why the three scholars it features have written as they have. However, I continue to be dismayed by parts of Knight's argument and the imperturbable masculinity and Eurocentrism of his focus. Many young literary scholars (and regular readers of *ARIEL*) may well take one look at the cover and title of this book and dismiss it, and the series in which it features, as intolerably reactionary. That would be a pity, because we can learn much from our predecessors and those who do think differently than we do. But it is also fair to say that a book of this sort seems bizarre, parochial, even uncommonly smug in its notions of the common and the uncommon at a time when Englishes of various sorts—critical, creative, demotic, refined—are helping redraw the map of literary and critical accomplishment and redefine notions of centre and periphery. Yet for some, established patterns of cultural enclosure are no longer enough; even the cultural commons requires sovereign sensibilities prescribing levels and rituals of devotion to 'the' canon.

Knight begins with Lionel Trilling's allegiance to cultural continuity and the fact that culture has in recent decades been seen as the site of rupture and discontinuity. This latter tendency is tracked through the MLA in a way consistent with the Amero- and Anglocentric emphases of what follows. The opening moves are deeply problematic in their attempt to protect the privileges of imagination from those allegedly "most accessible determinants" (4) of the literary—race, class, and gender—as though the latter three categories are instantly intelligible, relatively uncontested, and largely predictable in their shaping of creation and interpretation. Knight locates himself with Trilling "in the middle of things" (5), as though one is free to choose one's socio-aesthetic location, in this case a discreetly epic one within the critic's version of *in medias res*. Knight continues: "what we find and most value in Trilling ... is a criticism characterized by a willingness to reside in contradictions, to review and take responsibility for conveying a host of viewpoints, not all of which the critic finds congenial, but which nevertheless enhance the critic's own best sense that final determinations should be kept in abeyance as long as possible" (5). The diseases here are sectarian and reductive reading; and the cures are a kind of critical negative capability, a patience allegedly more purposive and productive than Derridean *différance*, and "a method of comprehension" on its way to modest forms of determinacy and mastery. According to Knight, the best readers, currently less and less common, are those who write not simply for the specialist but for the Johnsonian common reader,

their sense of an audience “bent in the direction of public concerns and a conversational style.” Donoghue, Kermode, and Steiner emerge as “generalists of unusual calibre” with strong claims to specialization too. They know “theory” but are not tempted by it into obfuscating or partisan readings.

However one reacts to Knight’s account of theory or the culture wars (or of the eighteenth-century origins of the common reader, for that matter), what follows are three fine portraits of three remarkably gifted and industrious literary critics. Knight mixes effective citation and commentary from the works and autobiographies of these three eminent readers to cast them as outsiders with a common touch rather than insiders firmly wed to privilege. The Irishman, the Manxman, and the Middle-European Jew are held to be more exilic and nomadic than one might think, indeed “formed by living among strangers.” And so a modernist trope is made to shed new light on modern critics whose authorial outreach is remarkable if not unrivalled, and part of whose glory has been to “champion” American and European literature in parochial Britain and Ireland, and to challenge “modishness” and narrow specialization in the United States. All three are well able to incite enmity as well as innocently incurring it, but their talent for the imperious, the acerbic, the ingeniously ungenerous, must be laid at the door of the academy in its entirety, and is certainly no reason to ignore or undervalue their accomplishments. Their insights and opinions continue to matter, thought not necessarily in ways they might prefer or wearily predict. And their range of interests and roving intellects are perhaps more deserving of emulation than envy or incredulity, because academic English Studies is in need of compelling public advocates rather than cloistered defeatists, while our students and successors in the professoriate need to value the versatility demanded by the undergraduate classroom as well as the deep inwardness that can make a graduate seminar buzz or even sing. There is no escape from style, even in a short review (like this one or the many memorable ones each of the three eminences has produced), and with style comes opportunity as well as responsibility. These three prolific critics neither seek to escape from style nor to escape into it. They value taste while evincing it. But taste, like theory, can function as a cheap pejorative as well as a glib guarantee of the one thing needful or the right stuff. Neither option has much place in education or public intervention or effective authorship, though Knight and his subjects all occasionally deliver a cheap shot or self-elevating appeal to the literary mysteries. But then so does every other author and reader I know. As Hamlet says in interpreting his mother to herself, with smart but self-contaminating hauteur, “Ay, madam, it is common.” Read on.

Len Findlay